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Tearing Up the Nun: Charlotte Brontë's Gothic Self-Fashioning

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Abstract

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This report explores the ideological motivations behind Charlotte Brontë's inclusion of and alterations to gothic conventions in *Villette* (1853). By building on an account of the recent critical conversation concerning the conservative Enlightenment force of the gothic, this report seeks to explain the political significance of a specific, nineteenth-century mutation in the genre: Lucy Snowe as an experiment in the bourgeois paradigm. Lucy Snowe's sophisticated consciousness of genre manifests in her minute attention to dress, but the persistence of her personal gothic history means that *Villette* enacts political tension between individualistic “self-fashioning” and historical determinism as clashing models for the origin of identity.

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In his 1810 review of one of Charles Maturin's more obscure gothic novels, Sir Walter Scott takes the opportunity to bemoan Ann Radcliffe's persistence in turning her narratives "seamy side out" by using what has come to be called the explained supernatural (qtd. in Clery 108-109).¹ Radcliffe's works would string readers along for hundreds of pages with the promise of ghosts, freshly murdered corpses and other mysterious paraphernalia tantalizingly dangled just around the corner, only to provide perfectly natural (if not exactly reasonable) explanations for all of the seemingly miraculous phenomena. This technique, in Scott's mind, undercut a painstakingly constructed illusion by, to continue his metaphor, revealing the elaborate stitching underneath an apparently tidy garment. Something about the highly affective gothic genre itself resisted such reduction. It wanted glamorous, glittering costumes in a constant flourish, not the gritty realism of seamstress labor.

Forty-three years after the publication of Scott's complaint about Radcliffe, Mrs. Bryan Proctor wrote to William Makepeace Thackeray about her experience reading Charlotte Brontë's final novel, *Villette* (1853). Proctor writes, "*Villette*...is an excellently written book—but a very disagreeable one. She turns every one... 'the seamy side out'"² (Proctor, 8 March 1853, 3:231). Mrs. Proctor here probably refers to Brontë's tenacious unveiling of her characters' private flaws and vices, but she could just as easily be criticizing Lucy Snowe's odd, proto-postmodern delight in detailing precisely how her various acquaintances, along with herself, would or would not make proper characters in conventional stories or traditional plots. Then again, perhaps Mrs. Proctor is thinking of the pensionnat nun's roots in the Radcliffean explained supernatural. In any case, the

¹Sir Walter Scott, Review of *Fatal Revenge; or, the Family of Montorio*. *Quarterly Review* 3 (May 1810): 344.

²Mrs. Proctor here potentially quotes *Othello*, 4.2. Emilia ironically accuses some knave of turning Iago's wit "the seamy side without," making him falsely suspect her of infidelity with Othello.

metaphor is aptly chosen to describe a novel in which the narrator has a healthy preoccupation with clothing. Seamy side out indeed.

I would like to explore Brontë's alterations of traditional gothic patterns for her own ideological ends, focusing largely on *Villette*. Brontë's novels challenge one major convention in particular, the highly essentialized identity, by crafting "self-fashioning" protagonists who exercise to some extent individualistic autonomy, which often requires, in some measure, breaking from their pasts. However, in *Villette* Brontë ultimately forces history, providence and destiny into an internalized mental space³ to suggest that specters of the past influence, if not predetermine, an individual's course, effectively putting boundaries on the ethos of pure individualism. Despite *Villette*'s obvious relationship with *The Professor* (1857), Brontë's first written but posthumously published novel, also centrally about her experiences in Brussels, Lucy Snowe can also be read as a direct response by a weather-worn author to one of her earlier heroines. While Brontë allows *Jane Eyre*'s (1847) eponymous heroine to enjoy the romance trope of stumbling headlong into an inheritance that makes her desired match socially and financially possible, the writer refuses Lucy the same concession. Lucy, in other words, is the dispossessed gothic heroine without the turn that restores her to an elevated status. Her progress forward in the world derives directly from her ability to self-determine, an ability that Brontë repeatedly links to the ability to self-fashion. I call "self-fashioning" precisely the capacity to literally fashion oneself through public presentation of the clothed body. The class importance of such presentation can be traced from Queen Elizabeth's sumptuary

³Terry Castle's highly influential "The Spectralization of the Other in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*" (1987) performs a similar examination of the internalization of supernatural elements in Radcliffean gothic. According to Castle, gothic Romantic individualism invests mental images with more importance than "reality." Radcliffean gothic diffuses the supernatural so that, ultimately, "The supernatural is not so much explained....as displaced. It is diverted—rerouted, so to speak, into the realm of the everyday. Even as the old-time spirit world is demystified, the supposedly ordinary secular world is metaphorically suffused with a new spiritual aura" (Castle, "Spectralization" 236).

laws to the financial advancement of industrialists and capitalists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, an advancement which granted individuals access to far more commercial clothing options than had been generally available in the past. Brontë's ideological experiment for the success or disappointment of her "rising character" ultimately rests between the possibility of self-fashioning and the inexorable tug of a personal gothic history that haunts Lucy's mind. An examination of *Villette* illustrates how Brontë melds ideologically key concepts like self-fashioning with the gothic protagonist to create a new, bounded, liberal individual. In Brontë's conception, those in the middle class could indeed fashion their own identities, but not without any historical remainder. Turning the garment of the patched-together, individualist self "seamy side out" would reveal more than ideological tension: it would reveal personal ghosts.

Lucy's understanding of her own identity relies partially on separating herself from the female bodies around her, distinguishing herself by an outward expression of interiority in the form of clothing choices. Her selections throughout the novel set her apart from the fashionable flock and are intended to visibly mark her individuality. That is not to say, however, that Brontë's heroines generally disapprove of or dislike fashion for its own sake. Brontë considered her characters' garments and relation to fashion a critical, deliberately placed aspect of their personality. She even penned a venomous response to a reviewer's accusation of inaccuracy in *Jane Eyre*'s clothing styles.⁴ Brontë

⁴In addition to calling *Jane Eyre* "anti-Christian" and accusing it of "fostering Chartism and rebellion" (Rigby 109-10), Elizabeth Rigby's review in *The Quarterly* also scathingly dismisses Bell's depictions of dress: "No woman—a lady friend, whom we are always happy to consult, assures us makes mistakes in her own metier—no woman trusses game and garnishes dessert-dishes with the same hands, or talks of so doing in the same breath. Above all, no woman attires another in such fancy dresses as Jane's ladies assume—Miss Ingram coming down, irresistible, 'in a morning robe of sky-blue crape, a gauze azure scarf twisted in her hair!!' No lady, we understand, when suddenly roused in the night, would think of hurrying on 'a frock.' They have garments more convenient for such occasions, and more becoming too. The evidence seems incontrovertible. Even granting that these incongruities were purposely assumed, for the sake of disguising the female pen, there is nothing gained; for if we ascribe the book to a woman at all, we have no alternative but to ascribe it to one who has, for some sufficient reason, long forfeited the society of

thought the issue important enough to make this document the preface to *Shirley* (1849), but, understandably, her publishers rejected the idea. A familiarity with the importance Brontë herself assigned to her protagonist's garments lends some heft to Lucy's engagement with fashion. Simply because Lucy initially prefers to deck herself out in unobtrusive gray garments and even calls her party dress a “gown of shadow” (Brontë, *Villette* 14.199), it is a grave mistake to assume that she longs only to conceal herself demurely from prying eyes or retreat scornfully from the materialist world of consumerism.⁵ Sara T. Bernstein labels Lucy an avatar of “anti-fashion,” which she describes in succinct detail:

Anti-fashion could be, in equal degrees, a marker of one's socially marginal status or a powerful indicator of independence and individuality. In *Villette*, anti-fashion is worn by those who either cannot or will not participate in the socially-constructed cycles of life. Anti-fashion offers an alternative to the display of femininity and wealth that codes the “proper” gender identities of daughters, wives, and mothers. Finally, the embrace of anti-fashion represents the relinquishing of an external, physical life, and a donning of the mantle of interiority. (Sara Bernstein 158)

Sara Bernstein's rhetoric of “donning and representing” to indicate interiority appropriately and paradoxically places any decision made through the discourse of clothing firmly within the visible public realm, while Catherine Spooner draws attention to the fact that “clothing is above all a means of inserting the self into social discourse,

her own sex” (Rigby 111). Brontë's condescending response jauntily passes by the political and religious accusations in order to defend, at length, the novel's accurate depiction of female life. In an albeit playful way, Brontë ties clothing to national issues by assuring us that “it is my own unbiased opinion that the Wrapper—the Flannel Wrapper harmonizes best with the genius of the British nation [to the folds of the Wrapper therefor I cling]” (Brontë, “Preface to *Shirley*,” Appendix I, 611). She also emphasizes the importance of garments to personal integrity through a fictional confrontation with Blanche Ingram's maid. The maid indignantly insists that Miss Ingram never wears crepe. The robe in question was made of “barège” (Brontë, “Preface to *Shirley*,” Appendix I, 611).

⁵Sara T. Bernstein remarks that the system of fashion itself might be socially inescapable. With or without an individual's consent, appearing in public places one in a system of visual rhetoric where clothing choices mark one as a particular *adherent* to a specific fashion school. Refusal to don *en vogue* clothes might mark one as an outsider, and this refusal might be as close as one can get to withdrawing from the rhetoric.

literary or otherwise” (3). Even Lucy's desire to remain unobtrusive in order to observe must be duly examined as a positive act of declaration instead of a negation of her presence entirely. Her unadorned, plain dresses do not render her invisible. They communicate to others her wish to be treated as though she is invisible, an anti-heroine of no narrative importance. Because of this distinction, Lucy's anti-fashion never threatens to transport her outside the dominant discourse. In fact, Lucy possesses a refined sense for what she considers proper and fitting for various circumstances. She exercises a considerable amount of versatility in her ability to costume each situation she observes appropriately, and her contempt flashes forth when the players she watches clash with the scene.⁶ From the elaborate gowns worn by boat passengers to the schoolgirl dress of Zélie St. Pierre, Lucy mercilessly mocks those she perceives as trying to assume roles beyond their reach. Ultimately, Lucy takes careful, predetermined pains with her own dress in order to fulfill various roles so that at some moments she removes herself from courtship scenes while at others she willfully casts herself as heroine.

This sort of “costume control” reflects Lucy's larger consciousness of control over her narrative-as-novel, participating in genre conventions and traditions. When Ginevra Fanshawe pesters Lucy Snowe about who she *really* is, bewildered because of her friend's new social status, Lucy, in a playfully cryptic way, responds: “Who am I indeed? Perhaps a personage in disguise. Pity I don't look the character” (*Villette* 27.379). Lucy boasts an understanding of how individuals who are secretly noble should look, and rejects herself as a proper model for a sensible, romantic heroine. We are confronted here

⁶For an extended discussion of *Villette*'s intimate relationship with gothic theatricality, especially concerning visual technologies, see Diane Long Hoeveler's “Smoke and Mirrors: Internalizing the Magic Lantern Show in *Villette*.” Hoeveler's article takes its cues from Castle's description of Radcliffian internalization, moving the conversation to the way magic lantern shows influenced or were reflected in models of epistemology. I would only add that Brontë's reliance on gothic phantasmagoria does not necessarily result in the body, specifically the female body, being “consistently elided in the text” (par 35), given, for example, Lucy's material awareness and appreciation of women's clothing.

with a question: how can any “personage in disguise” *look* the character? Isn't the point of disguise to be hidden or concealed? According to Lucy's suggestion, she is aware that there is something about the penniless hero in popular fiction that reveals his origins, something absolutely irreducible that screams “titled landowner” no matter how much lower-class degradation the writer heaps on him.

While the move from no-family to noble birth can be transposed into any genre, the gothic's frequent use of the essentialized identity makes it almost as necessary a staple as the ruined, ancestral estate. *Villette* has been described as a “New Gothic”⁷ novel, working in the vein of the genre, but critics tend to focus on the overtly supernatural aspects of Lucy's journey in lieu of her history or character development. History, however, especially of the family variety, has been identified as the beating heart of the gothic frame.⁸ Whether we examine Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Clara Reeve's *The Old English Barron* (1778), or Ann Radcliffe's *Romance of the Forest* (1791), we find ourselves dealing not only with ghosts (which may or may not turn out to be supernatural), castles and a fantastical relation to world history, but also with heroes who have been dispossessed of their family fortunes. These heroic figures, landowners by birth, may spend the entirety of a winding, twisty, murky plot reclaiming, or, better yet, falling neatly back into their property, but their personalities are never adversely affected by their circumstances. Theodore, Edmund and Adeline are frequently described, despite their trials and tribulations, as outshining expectations and generally impressing everyone with their modern sensibilities, personal honor and even poetic genius. Ultimately, their family history proves the only explanation for their exceptional abilities.

⁷See Robert Heilman for a description of Brontë's works as “New Gothic” (1958).

⁸For an extensive discussion of the political importance of the gothic's presentation of history, see Robert Mighall's *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction* (1999).

It is possible to argue that this obsession with virtue, with proving oneself before being able to lay claim to a glorious inheritance, shifts the focus away from the feudal “right to possess” to a middle-class “fight to possess” paradigm, but the gothic still maintains a model of identity that relies on some hidden core of virtue linked to family history. Critics have heretofore focused on the way gothic plots support the rise of the middle class, largely without considering the roots of character. Robert Miles's 1995 Foucauldian study, for instance, posits that identity, in the hands of the gothic genre, underwent a progressive overhaul. He claims that, in the gothic,

almost always the conflict shapes itself as that between the demands of alliance (the preservation of 'blood') and the urgency of personal choice, of sexuality at sea with a multitude of choices, of a desire that has slipped its legitimizing moorings....At its simplest the plot of Gothic romance is a threat to primogeniture, the arranged marriage gone wrong through the advent of a desire that proves literally unruly. (Miles 25)

Miles does later note that the lover in question is usually revealed to be “licit” in his/her claims and that the original match is ousted as “illicit,” but he still supports the idea that, overall, alliance has been overthrown for the sake of sexuality. The modern individual, when written into gothic settings, vindicates England's socioeconomic transition from an agrarian, feudal society to a culture of mercantile capitalism. In this conception, Enlightenment gothic not only strives to justify the rise of the middle class by rejecting the divine right to rule of a mythical aristocracy but also by superimposing bourgeois values and traits on its supposedly medieval protagonists.

My figuration of eighteenth-century gothic therefore departs here from an established critical perspective. Though I agree that the gothic begins to move downstream with the current, as it were, generally supporting “modern values” at the

expense of the traditionalism of an exaggerated feudal order,⁹ I also acknowledge the aristocratic residue left in the genre's construction of the individual. Perhaps the tension between personal choice and patriarchal edicts as laid out by Miles is a fantasy in which sexuality ultimately *supports* alliance. Though our early examples of the gothic genre might let the individualist fox into the hen house, they certainly do not take a hammer to the coop. Without deconstructing the right to rule of an ascendant social class, gothic Whiggery displaces feudal, land-based claims in order to assume the seat of authority itself. Stephen Bernstein makes a convincing case that gothic ideology is basically bourgeois ideology, but, as I will demonstrate with Brontë's renovation of the genre, the obvious inconsistencies between the gothic and middle-class ideals should not be concealed or dismissed. For instance, Stephen Bernstein argues that a humble protagonist's secret lineage does not have to conflict with middle-class values. He notes, "The frequent gothic peripeteia of showing that someone with no ostensible status actually possessed it all along (as with the marriages in Radcliffe's works) is actually well suited to middle-class aspirations toward greater status and stability" (Stephen Bernstein 159).

The point is well-taken. The middle-class values touted with the gothic are not meant to completely topple the existing social system, but rather to purge that system of perceived usurpation and reclaim a birthright by claiming financial ascendancy over the aristocracy. The rise of the middle class as depicted in the gothic begins to look less like the destruction of an antiquated system and more like the appropriation of the position of power within that system. This appropriation can only take place through the lawful channels erected by the feudal paradigm, so the gothic protagonists of sensibility and

⁹For a condensed argument on the gothic as a conservative Enlightenment genre, see Chris Baldick's and Robert Mighall's "Gothic Criticism" (2000).

reason simply *must* come from the aristocracy itself. The larger project of individualism, however, relies on individual autonomy which itself intrinsically requires a separation from the former forms of legitimacy like family history. While I agree that the sudden revelation of an inherent right to power in an apparently illegitimate source would indeed support the spread and upward movement of the middle class, I do not think we should ignore the subversive potential of romantic tropes, such as the essentialized identity, especially since nineteenth-century writers like Brontë considered them threatening enough to an ideal social order to invert, erase or even explicitly challenge. The revelation of lofty birth in a dispossessed character might provide the fairytale means by which the middle class could vindicate its dominance, but this device simultaneously undercuts individualism, which, according to Miles, is “the class expression of the bourgeoisie's will to power” (22). To return to Lucy's cryptic answer about her origins, her sensitivity to both the implicitly inborn nature of the “personage” and the conventional gothic motif of the disguise demonstrates an extensive narrative sophistication. Lucy's awareness of genre allows Brontë to construct a distinctly new type of gothic heroine: one simultaneously determined by personal history and her own capacity to “write” her story in an autobiographical mode *and* on her own body, through the rhetoric of clothing.

Amanda Anderson's discussion of detachment in *Villette* picks up on Lucy's awareness of narrative conventions: “detachment is also shown as the enabling condition of Lucy's capacity for social critique through artistry, a source of power and pleasure” (59). However, Anderson then argues that moments in which Lucy exercises narrative control by hiding “facts” from the reader “can be seen not so much as a power-play on Lucy's part, but rather as a way to forestall attempts to read her into conventional narratives” (61). Instead, I read the two as productively collapsing. Lucy revels in her

narrative power, treating it as an extension of her observational abilities. Her own awareness of her story as necessarily part of a literary tradition, and the control she is able to exercise *because* of this awareness, only reemphasizes the importance of genre manipulation to Brontë's ideological message. Genre manipulation in Lucy-as-storyteller merges with social manipulation in a savvy Lucy's active life, and she frequently uses clothing in the manner of costumes, as indicating, enhancing, and even fulfilling different roles.

Lucy begins to routinely take note of costume once she sets foot on the ship to Villette. Once there, perhaps because she is thrown into the female-oriented world of the school, perhaps because she feels so anxious away from the safety-zone of English customs, she details the fashions with a discerning, judgmental, but, above all, highly appreciative air. Even before she boards her ship to Boue-Marine and starts attacking the tacky, impractical silks of her fellow passengers, Lucy evinces an awareness of the importance, at least in the public eye, of presentation over interiority, surface over depth. This self-awareness separates her from other gothic heroines who are nearly always unconscious—either because their sensibility must come naturally since innocence excludes self-knowledge, or because they have quite literally swooned. When Lucy decides to go to London to try her fortunes, the elder Lucy-as-narrator describes her bearing as a “staid manner...which ere now had been as good to me as a cloak and hood of hodden gray; since under its favor I had been able to achieve with impunity, and even approbation, deeds that if attempted with an excited and unsettled air, would in some minds have stamped me as a dreamer and a zealot” (*Villette* 5.108). Lucy's self-presentation, as opposed to her intentions, determines how others respond to her. More importantly, Lucy knows how to manipulate these expectations based on visual cues.

Lucy's adoption of gray as her signature color, then, in the early stages of her employment at Madame Beck's, does not simply serve to signal Lucy's dismissal of material concerns. Lucy proves time and again that she possesses an almost uncanny eye for surveillance, and, as much as she retrospectively scolds Madame Beck for her spying, she engages in subtler forms of observation often enough. When Lucy intercepts the *billet-doux* meant for Ginevra, she scoffs at the efficacy of the direction "pour la robe grise," internally noting, "Madame Beck herself ordinarily wore a gray dress just now; another teacher, and three of the pensionnaires" as well (*Villette* 12.177, 179). Lucy's ability to conjure up the exact number of gray dress owners in her circle suggests that she might be more concerned with keeping up her appearance for the decided approval of some than Sara Bernstein admits. In fact, immediately after noting the purchase of the purple-gray gown she fondly praises as being "the colour...of dun mist, lying on a moor in bloom," the narrator details the approval she receives from Madame Beck for being dressed "convenablement" and "décentement" (Brontë, *Villette* 14.199; "suitably" and "modestly"). The affectionate recollection of blooming moors allows Brontë herself to bleed into her narrator and insert an emotionally charged image of the natural landscape of her home at Haworth. The moors are tied here to memories of Lucy's beloved England, her land of "l'Histoire et les Héros!" (*Villette* 29.414), so the staunch refusal to don another costume for the play takes on vague suggestions of national as well as personal pride. In *Shirley*, Brontë claims that English decency and tidiness can be judged by the care taken by lower-class women over their dresses: "the poverty which reduces an Irish girl to rags is impotent to rob the English girl of the neat wardrobe she knows necessary to her self-respect" (Brontë, *Shirley* 16.280). Dressing well not only reflects admirable personal qualities but makes one a veritable icon of English national attributes.

However, while costume change allows Lucy to don and discard various roles as she deems it appropriate, Brontë does draw decided boundaries around racially-inflected class distinctions using clothing rhetoric. The seemingly boundless promise of individualistic self-fashioning runs paradoxically against class anxieties when Lucy mockingly dismisses Mrs. Sweeny, the Irish governess who precedes her at Madame Beck's. According to Lucy, Mrs. Sweeny owes her position to nothing more than "a wardrobe of rather suspicious splendour—gowns of stiff and costly silk, fitting her indifferently, and apparently made for other proportions than those they now adorned; caps with real lace borders, and" (most importantly) "*a real Indian shawl*" (*Villette* 8.135; original emphasis). Here we have hit an interesting snag. Lucy can take advantage of the cultural connotations attached to various dresses to manipulate situations to her advantage, but the most important aspect of her assessment of Mrs. Sweeny becomes the *fit*, directly related to the *fitness* of the wearer to the wardrobe. Individuals are certainly not blank (magically malleable) paper dolls in this model. They possess inherent predispositions to certain roles, and Mrs. Sweeny's particular predisposition can be traced to class issues. Even for Ginevra, Lucy disapproves of her dressing like a "jay in borrowed plumes" (*Villette* 9.155), a line that would be misread as an indictment of fashion in general. Instead, the image strongly expresses Lucy's ethical notion that Ginevra should be able to *personally afford* her finery. The clothes would be "very pretty things, if you had bought them with money which was your own, and which you could well spare" (9.155). Self-fashioning, of course, is not a free-floating, ideological system, divorced from economic concern. It exists in a commercial realm, and Brontë evinces particularly strong notions about individualism and class relations in her oeuvre.

Charlotte Brontë's personal politics unfailingly relied upon ideologies of self to support stances on the rising bourgeoisie, the role of the aristocracy and the validity or

danger of democratic principles which continued to gain traction in the age of Chartism. Pam Morris helpfully isolates and summarizes three ideological stances at play in the time of Brontë's composition: "first, there was the ascendant Whig or bourgeois ethos of individualism, laissez faire, and rational progress; second, there were the residual patrician values of paternalism, traditionalism, inherited responsibilities, and duties; and third, there were the emergent demands for a mass-participatory, democratic social order made by the Chartists" (Morris 287). In order to triangulate Brontë's political bias in relation to these three perspectives, critics have usually turned to *Shirley*, Brontë's most explicitly political novel, but the threads of her developing sense of individualism and self-reliance that culminate in *Villette*'s alteration of gothic identity can also be traced through Brontë's other works. Nevertheless, an encapsulation of *Shirley*'s class politics can clearly demonstrate the ideological tension for Brontë between individualist rhetoric and history as a force detached from human agency.

Shirley's starkly depicted mob aggression, accompanied with barely-legible and therefore implicitly unreasonable written threats and suggestions of skulking violence against defenseless innocents,¹⁰ all but eradicates any potential sympathies for democratic principles on Brontë's part. Instead, *Shirley*'s politics are based largely in support of paternalism and in opposition, not necessarily to democratic movements in general, but to the willful manipulation of honest working-class men by rabblers like Moses Barraclough. While certainly a strawman argument, it is important to note that both Brontë's sympathies and critiques are based in a paradigm where individuals, not mass movements or laws, dictate society. Lucasta Miller calls *Shirley* "an attempt to rewrite

¹⁰See ch. 19 for a description of maddened mob violence against Robert's mill. For example, Brontë describes "the indignant, wronged spirit of the Middle Rank" as it "bears down in zeal and scorn on the famished and furious mass of the Operative Class" (Brontë, *Shirley* 19.325). See 2.32 for the narrator's scorn at the "peculiar" "orthography" of the Luddites' threatening letter to Robert, as well as 19.319-20 for the threat of mob violence against a sleeping Helstone and his household.

the Romantic cult of genius in female language” (Miller xxx). This cult of genius, or extreme individualism, requires the ideological illusion of political purity,¹¹ thus explaining why Brontë evinced some distaste in her letters for party politics while simultaneously, as critics have noted, embodying many High Tory values.¹² Miller calls her a paternalist, a radical Tory, and a “Romantic individualist,” and, as Brontë’s contemporary reviews illustrate, this political identity was easy to mistake for revolutionary fervor in her other works (Miller xxvii).

Elizabeth Rigby’s view that “the tone of the mind and thought which has overthrown authority and violated every code human and divine abroad, and fostered Chartism and rebellion at home, is the same which has also written *Jane Eyre*” might not be too far off the mark, though Brontë would indeed argue that a world of difference separates women and men like Captain Keeldar from scoundrels like Moses Barraclough (Rigby 109-10).¹³ Kinder reviews of *Jane Eyre* praised the individualist energies in Brontë’s writing, finding admirable self-reliance instead of threatening rebelliousness. According to one reviewer, the writer of *Jane Eyre* meant “to show how intellect and

¹¹For an examination of the political bias of individualist ideologies, see Nancy Armstrong’s *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987) and, more recently, her *The Limits of Individualism* (2005).

¹²Though Brontë here professes no party affiliations, the practices she details have affinities with paternalist High Toryism: “Your remarks respecting the Chartists seem to me truly sensible: their grievances should not indeed ‘be neglected, nor the existence of their sufferings ignored.’ It would now be the right time, when an ill-advised movement has been judiciously repressed to examine carefully into their causes of complaint and make such concessions as justice and humanity dictate. If Government would act so, how much good might be done by the removal of ill-feeling and the substitution of mutual kindness in its place!...though politics are not my study; and though political partisanship is what I would ever wish to avoid as much as religious bigotry; both errors seeming to me fatal to fair views of mankind in general, and just estimate of individual character” (Brontë, To W.S. Williams, 20 April 1848, *Letters* 2.51). Brontë did, however, align herself with the High Tories in her oft-quoted letter to Hartley Coleridge: “you suppose me to be a high Tory <and> belonging to that party which claims for its head his Serene Highness the Prince of the Powers of the Air. I would have proved that to perfection if I had gone on with the tale—I would have made old Thornton a just representative of all the senseless, frigid prejudices of conservatism—I think I would have introduced a Puseyite too and polished-off the High Church with the best of Warren’s jet blacking” (Brontë, 10 December 1840, *Letters* 1.240).

¹³Elizabeth Rigby. From an Unsigned Review, *Quarterly Review* (December 1848).

unswerving integrity may win their way, although oppressed by that predominating influence in society which is a mere consequence of the accidents of birth or fortune” (Fonblanque 76-77).¹⁴ A discussion of the representation of women's financial needs leads another reviewer to note that, for men, “The political, colonial and mercantile activities of the English people, that spirit of enterprise that takes Anglo-Saxons to every corner of the world, do it is true redress, for men, the effects of the law of primogeniture,” while women cannot actively earn their livelihoods (Forçade 102).¹⁵ Here we have middle-class individualist ideology at its finest: volatile and revolutionary when located in working characters but admirable when embodied by, at the least, an industrial capitalist. Nancy Armstrong has described how the determination of the self-made man first vindicated the rise of the middle class and then, in industrial novels of the 1830s and 1840s, had to be contained against the encroachment of the rhetoric of working-class rights,¹⁶ and critics like Philip Rogers¹⁷ and Albert Pionke have explained how Brontë exhibits just such a class bias.

My discussion of Brontë's use of genre through alterations to gothic identity in *Villette* relates closely to Pionke's explication of *Shirley*'s philosophical conception of individual character. Pionke argues that Brontë explicitly draws on the theories of German Romantics to endorse an idealistic model of identity while actually articulating a

¹⁴A.W. Fonblanque. From an Unsigned Review, *Examiner* 27 (November 1847).

¹⁵Eugène Forçade. From a Review, *Revue des deux mondes* (31 October 1848).

¹⁶See especially, “Novels rewarding self-assertion on the part of those in an inferior position undoubtedly provided the middle-class readership with a fable for their own emergence,” as well as, “The social climbers of the 1840s invariably threaten to become intruders, if not tyrants in their own right, by pursuing individualistic goals. Rather than justify the form of power that comes into being on such a basis, novels that were written against the ominous background of swelling industrial centers and Chartist rebellions represent any kind of competition as a disruptive force” (Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction* 51, 52).

¹⁷In his article “Tory Brontë: *Shirley* and the 'MAN'” (2003), Philip Rogers forcefully, and in opposition to what he depicts as willing blindness on the part of liberal scholars, draws attention to *Shirley*'s anti-democratic disregard for the working class, which he links to Brontë's agreement with the Duke of Wellington's repression of the Chartist movement in 1848.

materialist view expressed by thinkers like Locke. The idealistic model, which exists in several different variations in secular and religious thought, emphasizes personal agency and self-conscious betterment. Caroline's insistence that Robert treat his laborers like people instead of machines, the harsh treatment of the workers' revolt as mob violence, and Robert's ultimate conversion to paternalism illustrate Brontë's attempt to support a righteous middle-class consolidation of power through idealism: the ability to "be more" than one's environment and lineage. However, Pionke also convincingly demonstrates that Brontë entangles herself in a materialist argument by denying the working class any agency in a paternalist system and by repeatedly reiterating the inevitability of progress. The forces of history put pressure on the workers to revolt and pressure on the middle classes to purchase machinery and lay off laborers. The inevitability of progress ultimately allows Brontë to nostalgically mourn the industrialized landscape of the Hollow while completely diffusing any blame for the loss so that, for example, "Robert Moore's transformation of the Hollow is not an expression of hubris, but a realization of already extant potential" (Pionke 96). Heroic figures can be paradoxically praised for their boldness, which comes from agency, and acquitted of blame for the suffering caused by their actions, which comes from the undeniable force of history.

Brontë's novels all, to some extent, toy with the force of history against the problem of human agency, and an individualistic self-in-control is the desirable, if not the actual, outcome. In *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës* (1975), one of the primary bourgeois features Terry Eagleton identifies in Brontë's novels is her conception of the self, which is supposedly "a free, blank, 'pre-social' atom: free to be injured and exploited, but free also to progress, move through the class-structure, choose and forge

relationships, strenuously utilise its talents in scorn of autocracy or paternalism” (26).¹⁸ However, *Villette* simultaneously emphasizes Lucy's middle-class status as a “rising character” (*Villette* 27.380) while continuously undermining her ability to self-determine. There seems to be no critical consensus on precisely how much control, if any, Lucy exercises over her narrative or, for that matter, her own life.¹⁹ A contextualization of *Villette* as hijacking a gothic tradition in order to further vindicate the rise of the middle-class helps to explain why some critics see Lucy's narrative position as “an involuntary *exclusion* from her own narrative” (Brent 94-95), while others focus on her storytelling as a means to power, considering, for example, that “she seems first and foremost a *decoder* of signs, an interpreter of *other* people and events” (Lawrence 448). Lucy represents Brontë's intentional move away from and against the ideals she sees in romance writing. Lucy has no beauty, no class distinctions, and no preordained happy ending, so the question becomes whether or not a heroine bereft of a solid gothic identity can self-determine. The critical struggle over Lucy's conscious control of her narrative mirrors the tension between autonomy and determinism in the text itself. By participating in the gothic conversation, *Villette*, prior to scholarly

¹⁸He does acknowledge that the apparent meritocracy posited by individualist boldness, at least in *Jane Eyre*, ultimately becomes a virtue-testing system by which “self-reliance leads you to roles and relations which are objectively fitting” (26).

¹⁹Critics have long grappled with the conundrum of Lucy's amount of control over her text. What follows is a brief, certainly not exhaustive, list of critics who have weighed in on the question of Lucy's agency. To name several influential interpretations of Lucy as either a successful Romantic individualist or a materialist: Karen Lawrence reads Lucy's choice to be a spectator instead of a spectacle as a sign of her agency; Mary Jacobus, on the other hand, sees Lucy's absence in her own story as a sign of inescapable socioeconomic oppression; Jessica Brent, along the same lines, blames Lucy's “inability to be seen” for “a narrative breakdown and renders her powerless to relate a coherent story of her life” (95); Luann McCracken Fletcher and Christina Crosby investigate the implied fiction of essential womanhood in Lucy's ability to self-create and in her fear of being misread by others; Gretchen Braun has applied trauma theory to explore the extent to which past losses have determined Lucy's character; and Anderson has credited *Villette* with being “a complex rumination on practices of feminine detachment” (21).

interpretation, asks: to what extent does Lucy control how she presents herself to her readers? To what extent does she control how she presents herself to other characters?

To illustrate how Lucy's anxieties about her own agency prefigure critical concern, I would like to parse her discomfort with donning a male-coded costume for the fête. If, as I suggested earlier, and as she admits herself after the play, Lucy possesses a keen sense for role-playing, why does she reject the appropriate clothing for the part? Lucy clarifies the reason for her refusal to the reader in a way that provides little illumination, saying only, "To be dressed like a man did not please, and would not suit me....No. I would keep my own dress; come what might. M. Paul might storm, might rage: I would keep my own dress" (*Villette* 14.207). Spooner offers the interpretation that the various costumes forced on Lucy "afford her intense anxiety, primarily because they draw attention to her when she would rather be overlooked, but also because they seem to cause a disjunction between internal and external, to suggest that she is something that she is not" (56). Yet this reading overlooks the subtle ways that Brontë depicts Lucy appropriating or slightly modifying undesired costumes in order to make them not only tolerable, but perfectly suited to her, and it also cannot explain why Lucy thinks it acceptable to don pieces of male-coded clothing at her own hands. In this particular scene, discounting the unspoken but apparent gender discomfort on which Spooner draws, the struggle *against* being dressed by someone else is at the heart of her anxiety. When Lucy offers a compromise, she repeatedly emphasizes her control over the procedure, whereas before Zélie St. Pierre threatened her with, grammatically and somewhat literally, being objectified by the process. Lucy asserts, "It must be arranged in my own way: nobody must meddle; the things must not be forced upon me. Just let me dress myself" (*Villette* 14.208). The resulting costume layers the signifiers of masculinity over her own clothes. Roles can be assumed, used, discarded, but any loss of agency

would result in too costly a loss of self. Lucy uses visual rhetoric to attempt to control not only how others perceive her, but how she perceives herself and defines the limits of her personal sphere. She can certainly be an actor, but she must retain the right to determine which parts she plays. We see this anxiety over self-creation elsewhere, particularly when Lucy visits the art gallery in Villette that boasts the “Cleopatra.” Her distaste at the various portraits of dehumanized women cast in static parts to serve as either morality lessons or fetishized sex spectacles suggests a deep discomfort with objectification.

To some extent, Lucy's discomfort with these idealized women comments on Brontë's own move away from the angelic Enlightenment heroine. *Villette* rejects not only highly profitable social placement for its heroine but also conventional beauty, which Brontë frequently treats as simply another traditional shortcut to a happy ending. Her movement to plainer female protagonists and away from the standard, idealized heroines of eighteenth-century romance has a traceable history in her writing. The process of Brontë's self-conscious analysis of what constitutes a female hero probably began with the characters and narrative structures she encountered growing up.²⁰

²⁰Her father's subscription to periodicals like *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* was supplemented by issues of the *Lady's Magazine* provided by her mother or her aunt. In her 1840 letter to Hartley Coleridge, Brontë matches the romantic, gothic tales contained in its pages with a dramatic account of the *Lady's Magazine's* physical journey across the sea to her home in Yorkshire. She imbues the very act of reading gothic romance with the stimulation inspired by the content. Such a valuation demonstrates both the emotional impression these stories made on Brontë's mind and the impact their gothic structures had on her authorial ambitions. She tells him, “I am sorry Sir I did not exist forty or fifty years ago when the Lady's magazine was flourishing like a green bay tree....I would have contested the palm with the Authors of *Derwent Priory*—of the *Abbey* and of *Ethelinda*....I read them before I knew how to criticize or object—they were old books belonging to my mother or my Aunt; they had crossed the Sea, had suffered shipwreck and were discoloured with brine—I read them as a treat on holiday afternoons or by stealth when I should have been minding my lessons—I shall never see anything which will interest me so much again—One black day my father burned them because they contained foolish love- stories. With all my heart I wish I had been born in time to contribute to the Lady's magazine.” (Brontë, 10 Dec. 1840, *Letters* 1.240). The references to the gothic tales in the original draft of this letter are instead “*Count Albert* or the haunted castle—*Evelina* or the *Recluse of the Lake*—*Sigismund* or the *Nunnery*” (from the Draft 236-237). Margaret Smith points out in a footnote that “All three titles recall Radcliffean Gothic, a fashion which persisted in ladies' periodicals long after its heyday in the 1790s” (Smith, editor's note 14 to Brontë, “Draft” *Letters* 1.238).

Fittingly, Brontë's juvenalia imitates the formulas and character types she found in serial tales of contemporary periodicals, a formula which Margaret Smith identifies as heavily influenced by Radcliffean gothic (see footnote 20). Her early stories are full of "mystery and the magical and supernatural," and "invariably extraordinarily beautiful" heroes and heroines who are also "invariably aristocratic" (Barker 191, 190). These characters' identities typically follow the gothic blueprint. They are inherent, dependent on lineage, but must be proved by tests of virtue before the hero or heroine can claim his/her rightful place in the world. Brontë goes so far down the gothic path that, as Juliet Barker notes, "the revelations of true identity are often made through magical means" (191). Critics have been pleased to report that Brontë eventually turns from these gothic origins to begin exploring realist genres and psychologically profound characters, to make free with an anachronism. Barker calls Brontë's use of the supernatural and her loving, drawn-out descriptions, sometimes indeed accompanied with literal drawings, of beautiful heroines, elegantly dressed, a sign of her "immaturity" (191). In contrast, Christine Alexander describes the authorial transformation less as a rite of passage and more in terms of a proto-feminist revolt, one that would not fail to lead the young writer to genres attempting to reflect women as they actually existed in the "real world." She argues that Brontë "rebelled against the ideal image of female beauty that bore little resemblance to herself or to those she knew" (25). While these descriptions of the change that took Brontë out of Angria and into the English countryside each doubtlessly has a gem of truth, Brontë's alterations are also both highly political and highly literary in scope.

As we can see from her preface to *The Professor* (1857), Brontë began to focus less on inherent qualities in her protagonists and more on the forging fires of experience. The self-reliance figured as morally and psychologically necessary for her characters features strongly in this novel, the first written though not published until after her death.

Not only does the plot of this work forcefully assert the importance of individualism by having William Crimsworth reject the lifestyle offered to him by the aristocratic members of his family in favor of entering trade, but Brontë's "Preface" also states outright that Crimsworth is intended to

work his way through life as I had seen real living men work theirs—that no sudden turns should lift him in a moment to wealth and high station—that whatever small competency he might gain should be won by the sweat of his brow—that before he could find so much as an arbour to sit down in—he should master at least half the ascent of the hill of Difficulty—that he should not even marry a beautiful nor a rich wife, nor a lady of rank—As Adam's son he should share Adam's doom—Labour throughout life and a mixed and moderate cup of enjoyment. (Brontë, "Preface to *The Professor*" 3-4)

In 1856, after Charlotte Brontë's death, her husband Arthur Bell Nicholls included a note for the first publication of *The Professor*, claiming that Brontë wrote its preface "[shortly] after the appearance of *Shirley*" (4, note 24). *The Professor's* preface is certainly in conversation with *Shirley*, Brontë's previous novel. We can trace Shirley's rejection of Robert to Brontë's asserted determination to avoid convenience for her heroes, but given that *Shirley* puts the working-class William Farren in the position of Adam and implicitly elevates Robert, Yorke and Shirley to God's role in the Christian story of creation, this preface's focus on noble toil as opposed to noble management seems distinct from *Shirley's* paternalism. Brontë's next novel, namely, *Villette*, is consistent in her rejection of the *deus ex machina* of aristocratic birth adopted by Victorian melodrama, romances and the gothic. It also upholds her determination to withhold "sudden turns" for her protagonist that would "lift him [or her, in *Villette's* case] in a moment to wealth and high station."

Emphasizing struggle and self-creation at the expense of any innate qualities that assure happy endings allows Brontë to develop a distinctly middle-class ideology of

individualism, which includes withholding beauty, another supposedly inherent route to happiness, from her heroines. Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) immortalizes a passionate scene²¹ concerning the conception of *Jane Eyre* originally reported to the public by Harriet Martineau's obituary notice for Currer Bell.²² Martineau reports:

She once told her sisters they were wrong—even morally wrong—in making their heroines beautiful, as a matter of course. They replied that it was impossible to make a heroine interesting on other terms. Her answer was, “I will prove to you that you are wrong. I will show you a heroine as small and plain as myself who shall be as interesting as any of yours.” (Martineau 303)

Even though she divests her protagonists of glamorous origins and awe-inspiring beauty, Brontë continues to linger over dress. Though no longer a signifier of wealth or inherent social status, dress becomes ideologically weighted for Brontë, representing not only a character's aesthetic taste and appreciation (as a subject) of the beautiful object, but also a character's capacity for self-creation. The attention to individualism and self-determination, however, does not go untroubled. Brontë's use of the gothic genre for her last completed novel, with its distinct ideas of identity linked to family history, offsets, and troubles, this developing conception of self-creation.

Charlotte Brontë's use of the romance convention of a dispossessed orphan, cast adrift in the world, pushes the ideology of the gothic genre forward, past the point where a reconciliation with history becomes necessary to secure a psychically whole identity. Lucy Snowe begins her life in an unspecified socioeconomic stratum. As a narrator, she is either unable or unwilling to foreground the story of her family's dissolution and the ruination of her hopes for a stable future. She does, however, let slip or subtly drops hints that suggest her family offered her a good deal of financial and emotional security, a

²¹Gaskell says that, during a group reading and revision session for their work, “Charlotte determined to make her heroine plain, small, and unattractive, in defiance of the accepted canon” (Gaskell 258-59).

²²Martineau, Harriet. “Obituary of Charlotte Brontë.” *Daily News* (April 1855).

security that, due to some dreaded catastrophe, vanished entirely, leaving her economically ruined and psychologically traumatized. Lucy recalls visiting her godmother at the opening of her narrative, mentioning, “I believe she [Mrs. Bretton] then plainly saw events coming, whose very shadow I scarce guessed; yet of which the faint suspicion sufficed to impart unsettled sadness” (Brontë, *Villette* 1.71). The young Lucy's sense of unease is so acute that even the arrival of unexpected letters to the Bretton home causes pangs of anxiety and fear. Eventually, in a characteristically evasive way, Lucy frames the ultimate loss of her family as a conceit consistently deployed throughout the novel to refer to unspeakable tragedy. Utilized retrospectively by an older Lucy looking back over her life, the vision of the storm and the shipwreck to present her first bereavement emphasizes her ongoing grief over M. Paul's death at sea. She informs her reader:

I must somehow have fallen over-board, or that there must have been wreck at last. I too well remember a time—a long time, of cold, of danger, of contention. To this hour, when I have the nightmare, it repeats the rush and saltiness of briny waves in my throat, and their icy pressure on my lungs. I even know there was a storm, and that not of one hour nor one day. For many days and nights neither sun nor stars appeared; we cast with our own hands the tackling of the ship; a heavy tempest lay on us; all hope that we should be saved was taken away. In fine, the ship was lost, the crew perished. (4.99-100)

Soon afterward, the reader receives small snippets of information that suggest the orphaned, destitute Lucy has indeed fallen quite a ways from her relations' initial position. When she visits her old nurse, then a housekeeper for a former schoolmate, the schoolmate fails to recognize her. Lucy muses, “Different as were our social positions now, this child's mother and I had been schoolfellows, when I was a girl of ten and she a young lady of sixteen; and I remembered her—good-looking, but dull—in a lower class than mine” (5.108). Her subsequent trip to London then gives the reader a tantalizing

detail that will not be complemented with any more specifics for the rest of Lucy's tale: two of her uncles, Charles and Wilmot, were once respected guests at a hotel in which she seeks lodging.

A thorough familiarity with the fragments of her past that Lucy doles out not only gives readers a foundation from which to construct a much more psychologically complex narrator than otherwise, but also places *Villette* in a conversation with the gothic that does not rely entirely on the Radcliffean (or perhaps even Lewis-inspired) nun or the frequent rhetorical reference to hauntings and ghosts. Instead, Lucy's past helps account for the thematic link between ghosts as a vehicle of fright and ghosts as embodied anxieties about history. The prevalence of ghosts in the gothic as a whole can be partially explained by the genre's fears about the tyranny of the past over the present. To return to Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, for instance, Manfred cannot retain his position as lord of the castle because his grandfather poisoned the rightful owner, Alfonso. Alfonso's ghost signifies the usurpation in the past that has resulted in the unnatural state of affairs in the present, and it can only be exorcised once the proper lineage of Otranto is restored, signaling a psychic healing and a reintegration of Alfonso's descendants into the "proper" flow of history.²³ The Bleeding Nun story in Matthew Gregory Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) also speaks to the past's ability to break into the present. Here it occurs with such violence that the dead woman actually takes the place of Agnes as Raymond's symbolic

²³According to E.J. Clery's convincing model in *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction 1762-1800* (1995), providence, the hinge of a feudal world order, leaves Theodore's seat, not to mention Theodore's heart, in utter ruin, bringing up the question of whether or not such a destructive system can ever be the basis for a stable society. Clery drives her point home by referencing Walpole's Whiggish personal politics and the dismissal of the story's moral by the thoroughly modern editor. Having "*the sins of fathers...visited on their children to the third and fourth generation*" (Walpole 7; original emphasis) should seem as morally suspect to Walpole's readers as it does to his constructed translator. Therefore, *The Castle of Otranto* intentionally undermines the system of primogeniture and aristocratic control. However, Clery does not discuss how Walpole's characters are still bound by genealogical determinacy. Theodore's inherent virtues and sensibilities can be tied back to the purity of his family line, and the brilliant revelation that the lower-class suitor can now be landed because he or she is, in fact, landed, reinforces the importance of family history.

bride, literally overthrowing a body in the present with the corpse of the past in a ritual intended to carry individuals into procreative family life and thus into the future. Carol Margaret Davison, in her critical review of gothic literature, notes that gothic is “a literature of trauma” since that in “rendering psychic traumas in terms of physical attacks, ranging from rape and incest to murder (especially of an inter-familial variety), the gothic suggests that we can expose, confront and even redress the terrors of history. Indeed, such a process is portrayed as imperative for future progress” (54, 94). The power of history, either in the form of personal repression or vengeance-bent phantoms, to disrupt, disorder and generally discombobulate the present, has particular weight in the gothic. Stephen Bernstein specifies that the traumatic eruption of the past into the primary narrative is based in family histories which “are thus lodged deeply in the unconscious of the gothic's present and stand as a dominant motivational force for those characters living in that present, whether they know it or not” (153).

Villette's engagement with the subject of a traumatic family history, which, according to Gretchen Braun, determines the structure of the entire narrative, can essentially be described as a gothic structural set-up. In her application of trauma theory to *Villette*, Braun endeavors to “delineate how Lucy’s literally unspeakable loss defines the plot’s trajectory, requiring a different kind of storytelling that can articulate the psychic experiences of a socially marginalized subjectivity” (Braun 190). Bringing Laura Brown's distinctions between catastrophic and insidious trauma to bear, Braun argues that due to the psychological toxicity of each type, Lucy Snowe's story becomes both a chronicle of and an instantiation of her largely unsuccessful attempt to find a suitable witness for her trauma. According to Braun, “traumatic experience entails unwilling returns of the affects and/or physical sensations of loss or threat, which constitute unsuccessful but persistent attempts to comprehend it,” so Lucy-as-narrator as well as the

narrated Lucy are both trapped in their inability to come to terms with the psychic break that occurs not only after Lucy's bereavement, but when Lucy's new socioeconomic circumstances marginalize her (190). Braun's reading provides a convincing explanation for Lucy's apparent and critically noted lack of control over her own narrative, and I think a larger contextualization of traumatic family history as a genre trope of the gothic will help clarify the ways in which Brontë breaks from the previous model in order to examine the pressures and liberties that come with the necessary break from family history ideologically demanded by individualism.

Braun notes that the absence of a "happy ending," which would ordinarily include marriage or coming into her inheritance, differentiates Lucy's narrative from that of other Victorian works. Unlike its gothic predecessors, the story does not rely on an Edenic return to harmony signified by marriage to validate itself. Basically, *Villette* presents a riches-to-rags-to-stable livelihood tale, emphatically without any recuperation of the riches. Brontë's construction of Lucy's past intentionally aligns with and then breaks from specific plot structures in romances. This point, though belabored, is an important one to establish in light of recent critical interpretations of her history as either fabricated or inconsequential. Spooner posits that "Lucy...has no significant origins to expose; she has no secret as such, but the narrative process of ascension demands she must produce one" (57). Spooner's larger argument complicates the obsessive opposition of interiority and exteriority in *Villette* in constructive ways, but her claim that Lucy's traumatic past might very well be nothing more than a narrative construct²⁴ elides the importance of history in the novel. Spooner rightly emphasizes the necessity of ascension in the narrative model Ginevra relies on while she treats Lucy's social status as a riddle to be solved, but the full

²⁴Spooner's argument that Lucy's background is purely plebeian fails to take into account Lucy's rare but undeniably existent narrative forays into her childhood.

structure of the novel's narrative as a whole also depends on the standard gothic revelation of the protagonist's concealed yet undeniably manifested origins. Lucy's history is not the only one that plays with the trope of gloriously returning to a higher social plane from a tragic descent. Three characters at least have gothic narrative trappings in their socioeconomic backgrounds. Little Polly Home, whose mother Ginevra so strikingly recalls, is abandoned by her father only to rejoin him and become a countess. M. Paul even possesses a dash of romance of the Godwin-gothic sort. He tells Lucy "Though I have known poverty, and once starved for a year in a garret in Rome—starved wretchedly, often on a meal a day, and sometimes not that—yet I was born to wealth" (*Villette* 31.436).

Because Lucy does not enjoy the restitution of a holistic return to her past, she comes to represent the middle-class ability to self-determine. If the prevalence of reintegration narratives problematically affirms the feudal system that the Enlightenment-era gothic purportedly disavows, Lucy breaks this pattern by striving to go always forward. While Braun's article rightly brings to the fore the importance of family history to Lucy's psychological state, she downplays any agency or actions Lucy takes to suggest some degree of personal control or to affirm an identity based in the present instead of the past. During her time in London, Lucy contemplates the struggles ahead with mingled anxiety and determination. She remarks on "a strong, vague persuasion, that it was better to go forward than backward, and that I *could* go forward," categorizing her as a persevering survivor rather than a victim of debilitating trauma (*Villette* 5.111). This determination to press forward rather than attempt to loop back to recover her past largely seems successful. Later, upon reaching the city of Villette, Lucy declares, "It quite sufficed to my mental tranquility that I was known where it imported that known I should be; the rest sat on me easily: pedigree, social position, and recondite intellectual

acquisition, occupied about the same space and place in my interests and thoughts” (*Villette* 27.381). Lucy comes forward, indeed, as a bogglingly new type of gothic heroine. Her preoccupation with an individual's ability to self-determine, matched by an awareness of boundaries or restrictions to that same self-determination, manifests itself in Lucy's concern with fashion, costumes and dress. Her own manner of presenting herself suggests a model of selfhood that severely complicates the essentialized, importantly aristocratic, identity structure of the eighteenth-century gothic.

As Miles has articulated, “Gothic formulae are not simply recycled, as if in the service of a neurotic, dimly understood drive; rather, Gothic texts revise one another, here opening up ideologically charged issues, there enforcing a closure” (3). Brontë's entrance into the gothic conversation challenges specific threads of thought that run through the genre. For one, Terry Castle argues that authors like Austen, Mary Shelley and the Brontës are “crucial” in combating “the Gothic's Big Lie”: the fantasy that strife and danger are not to be found in modern England (“The Gothic Novel” 706). Brontë further uses the gothic to advance an understanding of the manner in which self-fashioning individuals are affected by their history, not simply by their upper-class ancestors, but by their own past experiences. Her alterations to gothic identity do not precisely expose that convention as a “Big Lie” but instead treat it as a half-truth to be tweaked and updated. Brontë deploys the gothic trope of a heroine separated from history, family and friends in order to re-examine the constitutive elements of identity in a booming consumerist, bourgeois society. An examination limited to Lucy Snowe's own self-fashioning betrays a preoccupation with the control of personal identity, whether agency is being consciously exercised in the proud purchase of a moor-colored dress or stripped away by well-meaning friends. Critics, particularly feminist critics, have been preoccupied with the question of whether or not Lucy Snowe can be said to exert control over her own life.

While valuable to debate especially in light of third-wave feminism, Lucy's own anxiety about her ability to self-fashion should draw our attention to the ideological struggle of individualism enacted within the text itself.

The gothic genre and clothing rhetoric intersect in moments of heightened anxiety, even terror, for Lucy. The tantalizing promise of self-determination through narrative awareness and costume-control is balanced by the terror of identity dissolution either in a lack of agency or in the subsuming of the present by the past. Lucy's fear of objectification, first strongly evinced in her dread of being dressed for the play by anyone but herself, surfaces again when Mrs. Bretton strips her of control over her appearance. Instead of being dressed like a man, she is dressed like a fashionable young woman, but she is, if possible, even less comfortable in clothes that gender her extremely feminine. Lucy depicts her surrender in repetitive lamentation that culminates in a moment of disconnect from her own reflection: "I found myself led and influenced by another's will, unconsulted, unpersuaded, quietly over-ruled....I was...requested to look in the glass. I did so with some fear and trembling; with more fear and trembling, I turned away" (*Villette* 20.277). Later that evening at the opera, she glances in another mirror and fails to recognize herself. Though these scenes can be read simply as Lucy's displeasure at her less than prepossessing personal appearance, on a future occasion she dons another pink dress, with another black accent piece, without losing a firm grip on her selfhood. Instead, her fear and her confusion at the opera signal a genuinely gothic problem: traumatic discontinuity with the self. Lucy's confrontation with herself via mirror images should resonate especially since Emily Brontë used dissociation from reflection to signal a madness brought about by lack of control in *Wuthering Heights*.²⁵ Jane Eyre's

²⁵Emily Brontë accentuates the dissolution of Catherine Linton's mind when she fails to recognize herself in the mirror (Emily Brontë, 12.113). Not only has Catherine slipped into madness, but her literal inability to grasp who she is speaks to several major themes in the novel. As a social critique, Catherine's madness

childhood experience being locked in the Red Room suggests that Charlotte was also interested in establishing a relationship between madness and the loss of agency. Moreover, in the eighteenth-century gothic, identity is determined by historical continuity. Laying claim to one's self involves laying claim to one's family, after which the dispossessed character's inheritance can be restored, along with the harmony needed for a wrap-up to the narrative. In the course of *Villette*, Lucy loses her family and her inheritance, but the reader only hears of a momentary psychical detachment from her own identity after she has lost control over the role she is playing.

This struggle between the goal of self-creation and the threat of self-dissolution most clearly manifests itself when the novel materially blends haunting gothic history with motifs of role-playing and self-creation, namely, through the persistence of the ghost nun. While Lucy strives to self-fashion, she also struggles against falling prey to what she sees as a deterministic Catholic identity. She fears the nun in large part because the nun represents a break from Protestant individualism. Of course, Lucy's blatant anti-Catholicism can be examined in several lights: swelling discriminatory sentiment in Victorian England after the culmination of the Catholic Emancipation in 1829, Brontë's own mixed feelings about Catholicism, or a nationalism-driven distinction between the English and other European countries like France and Spain.²⁶ In the case of *Villette*, for each historical context, Protestant individualism can be located either at the core or on the periphery of the issue, ideologically fueling Lucy's insistence on a fundamental

might comment on the difficulty of locating a stable selfhood within a marital relationship while it simultaneously speaks to the universal psychological confusion of cohering a set, unique identity that can persist throughout hardship, aging and extreme change. The multiple "Catherines" Mr. Lockwood finds scratched into the paint on the window ledge have become, during Catherine Linton's illness, hardly any Catherine at all.

²⁶Micael M. Clarke argues that critical condemnation of *Villette* as staunchly anti-Catholic obscures Brontë's subtle fusion of Protestantized Catholic values. For an in-depth discussion of the religious discourse in *Villette*, see her article.

Protestant/Catholic split. Her anxiety over loss of personal control consolidates itself in one way around fear of spiritual and mental tyranny, manifesting for Lucy as a distrust of thoughtlessly carrying out Catholic rituals at the expense of self-examination and personal faith. Micael M. Clarke, in her examination of the Protestant/Catholic relationship in *Villette*, remarks that Lucy sees Catholicism as

a hierarchical, communitarian world in which individual roles are determined by a pre-existing order of things, as opposed to the Protestant vision of a more horizontal, individualistic society in which the self-disciplined agent is endowed by God with reason and free will in order to pursue life, liberty, and happiness according to his or her own lights. (Clarke 969)

After visiting Père Silas, Lucy's fear that she might succumb to the temptations of Catholicism is grounded not only in religious loyalty, but also dread of losing herself so that "instead of writing this heretic narrative," using her own voice and relating her unique experiences, she would mechanically be "counting [her] beads in the cell of a certain Carmelite convent" (*Villette* 25, 232). In her own narrative, however, Lucy is problematically linked to the ghostly nun haunting Madame Beck's pensionnat. She finds herself cloistered within the walls of the school as the nun was cloistered within the walls of the convent. She suffers at the hands of her own passion and feels tortured by it just as the nun was supposedly buried alive for a crime against her order. Lucy even entombs her letters from Dr. John under the tree where, according to legend, the nun's bones lie. If typical gothic novels express their anti-Catholicism by condemning the tyrannical, manipulative control of the church over the lives of potentially admirable individuals like Ambrosio and Agnes de Cisterns in Lewis's *The Monk*, *Villette* connects the cruelty of a religiously cloistered life with the cruelty of the socially-cloistered life led by Lucy, the repression in her mind imposed by herself and the cult of beauty and success around her instead of by any outside order.

Examining the nun in the context of gothic conventions has allowed critics to assert that *Villette* recognizes identity as non-essential and socially-constructed.²⁷ Spooner claims the gothic “foreground[s surface] in order to interrogate the surface—depth relationship. The metaphors of masking and disguise seem to indicate an 'authentic' self hidden beneath, but in gothic texts they consistently work to problematise that authenticity” (Spooner 5). According to this reading, when the nun turns out to be nothing more than its own habit, it becomes an eternally deferring signifier, a veil for a truth that does not exist. Lucy, like the nun, lacks an essential identity, and the reader's efforts to interpret or uncover the “real” Lucy can never be conclusive. Though a convincing deconstruction, this reading brings to bear only one gothic trope, surface/depth play, while excluding a massive gothic element inherent in the nun's story and important for understanding Lucy's own: the traumatic persistence of the past.

To complicate reading the nun as an eternally deferred site of possibility, we can turn to Lucy's masochistic fantasies of M. Paul's marriage. When contemplating the vision of M. Paul's attentions to Justine Marie at the festival, Lucy turns her powers of narration against herself. She constructs a future for M. Paul that, like Graham's and Polly's, does not include her: he will depart to gather his “Indian fortune” while Père Silas, Madame Walravens and Madame Beck “guard for him the treasure he [leaves] in Europe.” In M. Paul's projected happy ending, “the saintly consecration, the vow of

²⁷Concerning the nonentity of the nun, Spooner observes that “the external orchestration of the disguise is in fact the only meaning or signification that the nun possesses; the supervision of a Gothic space which contains nothing more than the secrets of its own production” (59). Crosby points out, “Brontë's incorporation of gothic conventions which highlight the tension between surface and depth, and which stress the processes of representation, is a measure of her greatness and of the power of her writing to suggest the 'truth' of woman—that there is no singular truth, no certain identity, no answer to the enigma waiting to be unveiled. Charlotte Brontë's last novel, then, is both the compelling narrative of a woman's accession to her proper place and a text which continually displaces identities and definitions” (715). Following Crosby, Fletcher claims, “Even the character in disguise, in other words, has no real substance: Lucy's nun had only the substance she assigned to it” (724).

constancy...was forgotten: the blooming and charming Present prevailed over the Past; and at length his nun was indeed buried” (*Villette* 39.540). With the inclusion of the emphatic “indeed,” Lucy alludes to the incomplete internment of the ghost nun, the animated corpse who refuses to stay buried. For the Present to truly triumph over the Past, M. Paul must renounce his faithfulness to the old Justine Marie in favor of the new, effectively burying the nun. We can therefore read the ghost nun as representative of the persistence of the past instead of as the emblem of deceitfully-concealed nothingness. Indeed, the interpretive assertion that the removal of the nun's veil would reveal only that there is no capital-T Truth elides the importance of Lucy and others experiencing the nun *as* ghost and therefore significant as a marker of some past trauma. Even though it is important to remember that the nun is really nothing more than a dandy in a costume, its power as a ghostly presence still affects Lucy and M. Paul to the point that they each evince “morbid fantasies” in relating the ghost to the original Justine Marie (*Villette* 35.481).

This resurgence of the past troubles the self-fashioning autonomy promised by middle-class ideology. Individualism in its essence depends heavily on a single person's ability to construct a life in the present disconnected from history. Lucy acknowledges that she cannot build a life or an identity based on her social station at birth or her socioeconomic situation growing up: a decidedly anti-essentialist conception. The self-fashioning and theatricality rampant in Lucy's story present a theory of constructed identity. However, Lucy never actually manages to escape her traumatic, gothic past, and her inability to self-fashion or move forward with complete freedom demonstrates Brontë's conception of history as inescapable. For instance, Lucy matches the reign of the ghostly nun with frequent references to fate, and hers, she candidly admits, is an unkind destiny. If we follow the general consensus and read M. Paul's fate as death at sea, the

frequent references to the sea, to storms, and to ships in Lucy's narration of her story become traumatic resurgences of her loss, ghostly reminders of her own disaster.

The ghost nun's undeniable materiality finally throws the question of self-fashioning into sharp relief. Throughout her story, Lucy has been immensely particular about her dress, loath to allow others to choose her garb, and keenly aware of the presentation she makes based on her clothing. When she examines the clothes Ginevra has left on her bed, she even takes care to specify, "The garments in very truth—strange as it may seem—were genuine nun's garments" (*Villette* 39.544). What, here, makes a garment "genuine"? Are we to believe that Colonel de Hamal made off with a few bundles of used clothes from a nunnery? Are we to assume that a carefully constructed facsimile would count as a legitimate, even consecrated costume? Perhaps instead we should look at Lucy's insistence on the authenticity of the articles as an expression of her own concealed unease.

Eva Badowska asserts that *Villette* "shows things—commodities, furniture, ornaments, the whole bazaar of Choseville—to be fundamental to the constitution of persons even in a novel that fears and scorns the thingness of things" (1513). What happens, however, when an object chooses an owner instead of an owner choosing an object? We can measure Lucy's violent reaction to the nun garments left on her bed against an anxiety of being subsumed by the material possession of the clothing and, in effect, becoming the nun herself. In strong, short phrases made all the more emphatic by dashes, Lucy declares,

All the movement was mine, so was all the life, the reality, the substance, the force; as my instinct felt. I tore her up—the incubus! I held her on high—the goblin! I shook her loose—the mystery! And down she fell—down all around me—down in shreds and fragments—and I trod upon her. (*Villette* 39.544)

Lucy basically proclaims martial victory against the shredded garments, tearing them up so that they cannot, ghost-like, possess her by encompassing her. Calling the clothes an “incubus” seems particularly meaningful here since that brand of demon descends on individuals, particularly women, in their sleep and rests on them like a weight (or a shroud?). The incubus is also associated with oppressive nightmares. Supposedly victorious, Lucy then proceeds to share yet another bed with the nun, the first being the plot of land under the pear tree where she buries her letters from Dr. John. She takes the nun's place in bed and then figuratively assumes her religious role by becoming the eternally chaste bride of M. Paul who thinks of caring for her own school in terms of a stewardship from her absent king (*Villette* 41.560). Instead of exorcising the nun, Lucy unintentionally internalizes her, and even though she destroys the clothes in an attempt to secure her autonomy, she still dons the role of the nun, waiting to be united with the object of her devotion.

Eighteenth-century gothic introduced more problems than solutions for later Victorian writers attempting to capture and express a desirable social order, and our critical understanding of gothic genealogy should reflect an awareness of the ideological drive behind the mutations in genre conventions. *Villette* presents a complex structure of individual identity that leaves room for self-fashioning while insisting upon the undeniable influence of history by stretching the boundaries of genre conventions. Lucy Snowe simultaneously makes a convincing nineteenth-century gothic heroine, struggling with tumultuous pressures from her family past, and a reasonably progressive icon of bourgeois individualism, signaling her awareness of nonessential roles through her observational attention to costume. She takes great pride in her ability to fully comprehend, and to an extent even manipulate, the social situations in which she finds herself. However, the anxieties that surface again and again when some outside (or

inside) force threatens to control her visual rhetoric foreground Lucy's conception of her identity as threatened by a loss of, if not precisely unfettered agency, certainly her ability to consciously engage with her various roles. She can assert herself by refusing Madame Zélie and revising the part Mrs. Bretton forces on her with the pink dress, but, ultimately, the garments she shreds, with all their ghostliness and historical residue, become the clothes that define her life. For Lucy, the ghost nun dissipates when she tears apart the black-and-white habit, but the visual rhetoric of the religious devotee becomes the traumatized rhetoric of a writer who has substituted "counting beads" for counting her losses. To be glib, the black-and-white habit returns as a black and white habit, and as Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* departs from the gothic convention of essentialized identity to support the values of a rising middle-class, it troubles the autonomy lauded in those values by haunting Lucy with a traumatic past and a ritualized existence.

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